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ABSTRACT

The "blue collar blues" and the "white collar woes" are plaguing business and industry, and the alienation of the American work force is manifest. Organizations are rapidly realizing that they must change or die. Recent work in organizational development has established a causal relationship between managerial communication effectiveness and organizational efficiency. As a result, scholars need to develop and refine the application of communication theory to the requirements of business and industry. Recent breakthroughs in organizational consulting are being made which need to be shared with the academic community, since these breakthroughs considerably modify the traditional role of the communication consultant. Important research of this nature is being conducted in the Department of Communication and Organizational Behavior at the General Motors Institute, which is participating in a multi-faceted organizational development program in numerous General Motors facilities. The emphasis is on a general systems approach that stresses organizational development in addition to management training and development. The approach employs a survey feedback methodology. As traditional sources of financial support for basic research are diminishing, a greater emphasis on applied research should be stimulated by those businesses and agencies most in need of the information. (EE)

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IMPROVING STRATEGIES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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Applied research which tests the relative effectiveness of various intervention strategies (e.g., management training, sensitivity training, survey feedback, etc.) are discussed. Consulting experiences in General Motors are also included.

This is a time when we hear increasingly about the so-called "blue collar blues" and the "white collar woes." While worker alienation is difficult to document, the human costs can be felt by the presence of absenteeism, job turnover, grievance rates, diminished product quality and smaller profit margins.

Any organization interested in minimizing the above-mentioned difficulties must be willing to continually adapt and change or become a victim of its own problems. The most rational means for implementing change is communication, and recent work in organizational development (Likert, 1967, 1973) has established a causal relationship between managerial communication effectiveness (among other things) and organizational efficiency. As a result, there appears to be an urgent need for communication scholars to develop and refine their expertise in applying communication theory to the needs of business and industry. Furthermore, as traditional sources of financial support for basic research are diminishing, a greater emphasis on applied research should be stimulated by available financial support in this area.

Historic Foundations

Speech Communication

Speech communication scholars have long been interested in improving communication within the organization. A representative sample of sources indicates that at the level of interpersonal skills development, materials have been developed in general semantics (Haney, 1973) counseling (Zima, 1971), and listening (Nichols, 1957). In the area of group communication skills development, problem solving is dealt with by Bormann, et al, (1969), and Zelko (1969). Sensitivity training has been discussed as well (Tubbs, 1973). At the level of public communication skills development, materials have been written on manuscript speaking (Haskitt, 1972) as well as extemporaneous speaking (Wilcox, 1967; Tacey, 1970). Finally, at the organizational communication level,

several excellent sources have been developed (e.g., Carter, 1972; Huseman, et al, 1969; Redding and Sanborn, 1964; Thayer, 1968; and Zelko and Dance, 1965). While many other sources could be cited, these indicate the breadth of coverage of topics directly related to speech communication within the organization.

Organizational Development

Concurrent with the work in speech communication has been a growth in the area of organizational development (OD). Organizational development is defined as ". . . the application of knowledge, concepts, and research findings about human behavior in organizations directed at planned change and aimed at increasing the organization's effectiveness" (Beckhard, 1969). The definition which has been used extensively by the General Motors Organizational Research and Development Department is, "A planned and systematic approach to organizational assessment and organizational change, proceeding from a broad and flexible view of organizational behavior, with the primary goal being to improve the processes by which the business functions and to alter those human and technical features which limit the organization and its employes from achieving their full potential." Various methods have been developed to implement OD efforts. Argyris (1962) uses sensitivity training as the basis of much of his OD efforts. Beckhard (1967) emphasizes the role of the "confrontation meeting" to more explicitly identify communication failures as they are manifested by erroneous perceptions of various sections of an organization. Blake and Mouton (1969) outline a six-phase OD effort over a several-year period including: (1) studying the Managerial Grid, (2) studying the behavior dynamics of the organization in relation to the grid, (3) studying the intergroup dynamics, (4) setting up an Ideal Strategic Corporate Model, (5) implementing change tactics to strive toward the Ideal Model, and (6) evaluate the results (page 16). An important feature of this plan is the long-range nature of the OD effort.

Greiner (1970) offers an intriguing model of the change process. Based on eleven successful change efforts, the common elements which account for the change are incorporated into a six-phase change paradigm (Figure 1, page 3) (Greiner, 1970, page 222).

In an attempt to further identify the more effective strategies for organizational change, Bowers (1972) compared the results of OD efforts in 23 organizations including more than 14,000 respondents. Four experimental treatments including (1) Survey Feedback,

Figure 1. Dynamics of Successful Organization Change

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(2) Interpersonal Process Consultation, (3) Task Process Consultation, and (4) Laboratory Training were compared with two control treatments (Data Handback and No Treatment). Pre and post measures were taken with the Institute for Social Research (ISR) Survey of Organizations. Bowers, page 21, states that

> The results indicated that Survey Feedback was associated with statistically significant improvement on a majority of measures, that Interpersonal Process Consultation was associated with improvement on a majority of measures, and that Laboratory Training and No Treatment were associated with declines. In addition, organizational climate emerges as a potentially extremely important conditioner of these results, with Survey Feedback appearing as the only treatment associated with substantial improvement in the variables of this domain.

The enormous scope of the Bowers study certainly makes the results appear more significant than those of most studies. In another article, Bowers and Franklin (1972) explain in more detail the mechanics of the Survey Feedback method.

> . . . many persons mistakenly believe that survey feedback consists of a rather superficial handing back of tabulated numbers and percentages, but little else. On the contrary, where the survey feedback is employed with skill and experience, it becomes a sophisticated tool for using the data as a springboard to development. Data are typically tabulated for each and every work group in the organization, as well as for each combination of groups that represents an area of responsibility, including the total organization.
>
> Each supervisor and manager receives a tabulation of this sort, containing data based on the responses of his own immediate subordinates, together with documents describing their interpretation and use. A resource person, sometimes from an outside (consulting) agency and at other times from the client system's own staff, usually counsels privately with the supervisor-recipient about the contents of the package and then arranges a suitable time when the supervisor can meet with his subordinates to discuss the findings and their implications (page 45).

In a further refinement of earlier work, Likert (1973) is in the process of developing a system of accounting for the human resources of an organization. Building on the ISR Survey of Organizations, the extent to which an organization's resources are developed (or exploited) is measured and computed into a financial figure. This work seems to be a promising prospect for the future in terms of assessing the value of OD change efforts from a profits/cost standpoint. It is already being used in 50 companies in the United States (Rohan, 1972).

The General Motors Institute Consulting Model

Growing out of the two historical trends just described is the GMI consulting model (see Figure 4, page 8).

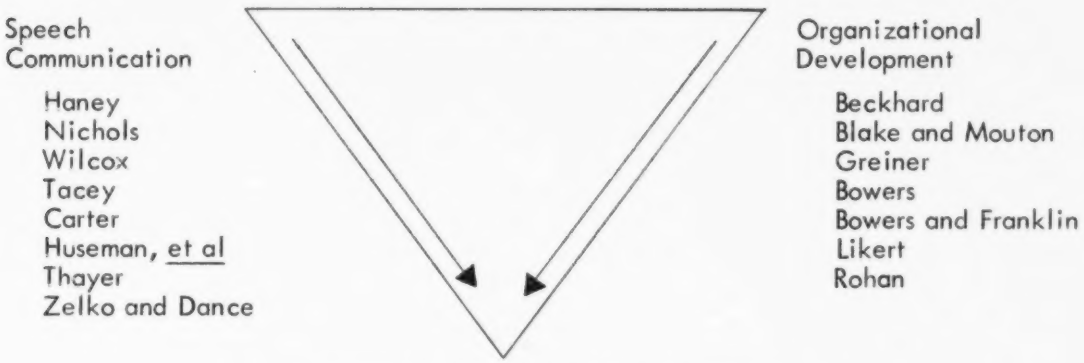

Figure 2. Historical Trends

Reeser (1972) offers a tongue-in-cheek description of the process by which organizations acquire an OD program. He states,

> When companies really get serious about behavioral science, they undergo what is called "organizational development." This endeavor involves a long-term corporate commitment, supported fully by top management, to diagnose and correct problems that keep the organization from organizing its full capabilities. Behavioral scientists, usually acting as external "change agents," are called upon by senior management for assistance on a consulting basis. In most cases, the behavioral scientists sell the concept to management; management seldom discovers a need and looks to the behavioralists for help.

In General Motors Corporation, however, it has been a mutual interest between supervision and several staff groups to engage in organizational development programs. One of the staff groups includes the faculty of the Department of Communication and Organizational Behavior at General Motors Institute. Zima and Smith (1971) and Smith, Richetto, and Zima (1972) have described the role of communication in organizational change and development.

Working from the standpoint of a general systems model similar to that described by Katz and Kahn (1966), we begin to see that communication plays an important role in influencing several indicators of organizational efficiency. Hain and Widgery (1973) offer the following modification of an earlier model of Likert's (1967) on the next page.

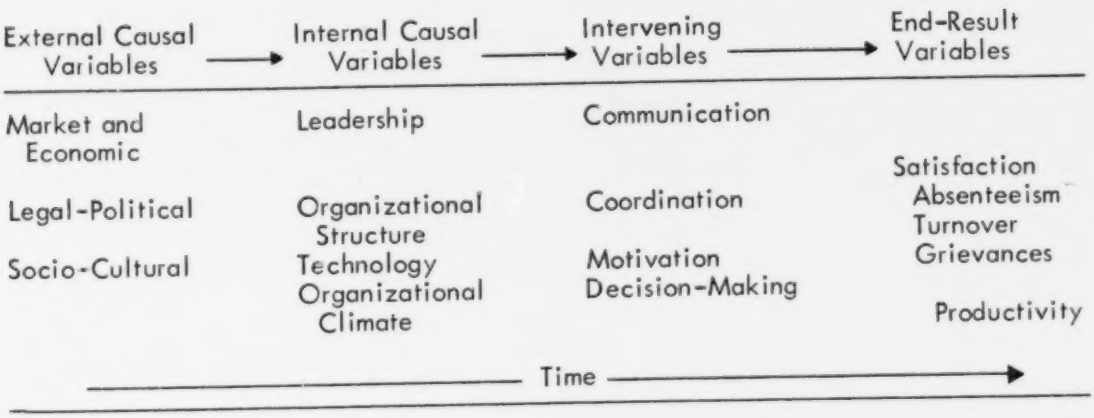

Figure 3. Hain's Causal Sequence

Each of the four variables above is defined as follows:

> External Causal Variables are independent variables operating outside the province of the organization, but which have a powerful influence on organizational performance. It is important to note that these variables cannot be directly altered or changed by management and were not measured.
>
> Internal Causal Variables are also independent variables which determine organizational performance. However, these variables can be altered or changed by management. The causal variable measured was a supervisory discrepancy index.
>
> Intervening Variables reflect the internal state and health of the firm as measured by its collective capacity for effective communication, interaction, and decision making. The intervening variable investigated was a communication index comprised of (1) trust and (2) information flow.
>
> End-Result Variables are dependent variables which reflect the degree to which an organization is meeting its goals. Job satisfaction is an end-result variable and was the only one measured. (Page 1-2.)

Working from this framework, Hain and Widgery found that the data supported their two hypotheses that (1) a significant correlation existed between communication effectiveness and employe satisfaction, and (2) that there were significant negative correlations between ratings of supervisory leadership discrepancy and communication effectiveness (where supervisory leadership discrepancy was defined as the difference between subordinates ratings of their real and their ideal supervisors). An important implication from this study is that communication indices tend to predict other end-result indices (albeit the data are correlations and therefore do not prove causality). Repeated measures on these factors tend to bear out the causal relationship when the factor of time is partialed out.

In a major study of organizational development in four industrial plants, Hain (1972) found that three factors could be identified which seemed to account for success in the change effort. Hain states,

> One of the most significant variables in differentiating a successful change effort from an unsuccessful one is whether the organization, and especially top management, was under considerable external and internal pressure for improvement. It should be recalled that plants A and B -- the previously designated effective plants -- did not change; while plants C and D -- the previously designated ineffective plants -- did change significantly. Plant C changed toward "Systems 4" and plant D changed toward "Systems 1." What, then, are the major differences between plants C and D?
>
> First, while both plants were presumably experiencing external pressure, from corporate executives for improvement, it seemed to the researcher that only plant C was experiencing internal tension. Plant C employes expressed concern and great anxiety about job security, with many employes feeling that, "if things didn't improve, there will be no plant for us to work in." Greiner (1970), in distinguishing less successful change from successful change, points out that one characteristic which separated the former from the latter was that the former felt internal pressure as well as external pressure to change, whereas the latter did not experience any pressure to begin with, or experienced only external pressure from top management. A second reason for plant C changing can be attributed to change in top management which took place shortly after the inception of the study.
>
> As indicated above, a second variable which distinguishes successful from unsuccessful change seems to be: intervention from an outsider. Unlike the other three plants, plant C received a new plant manager who came from a highly successful plant shortly after the beginning of the change program. This new plant manager was highly respected for his skills at improving organization practices. Moreover, being a newcomer allowed him to make a relatively objective appraisal of the organization; and entering at the top gave him a great deal of formal authority to affect the behavior of those under him. It is noteworthy to mention that the new plant manager of plant C was subsequently rated by his executive staff as being a "Systems 4" manager.
>
> The third important variable which seems to differentiate plant C from the other three is that only in plant C was there a stage of "reality testing" before large-scale changes were introduced. By "reality testing" it is meant that solutions and decisions are developed, tested, and researched on a small scale before attempting to apply the change program to the entire organization. In plant C one department was designated as an experimental subunit to which the change procedure was initially applied and found successful. The change program then spread through a series of success experiences and was absorbed into other parts of the plant. Plants A, B, and D did not include this "reality testing" phase. (Page 6-7.)

Based on other recent studies in General Motors (Zima, 1972; Tubbs, 1973; Richetto, 1973; Hain, Richetto, Schwendiman, Tubbs, Widgery, Zima, 1972) the following model appears to have promise for implementing a successful organizational development program.

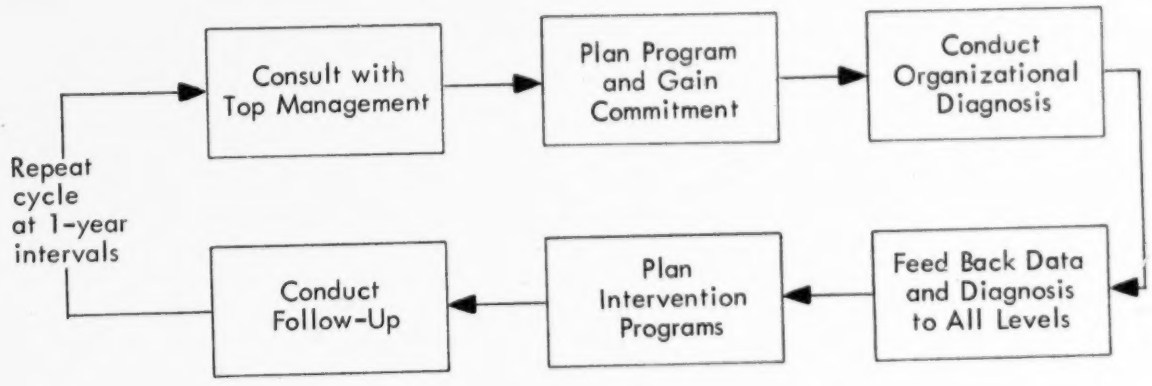
Consult with Top Management
Plan Program and Gain Commitment
Conduct Organizational Diagnosis
Feed Back Data and Diagnosis to All Levels
Plan Intervention Programs
Conduct Follow-Up
Repeat cycle at 1-year intervals

Figure 4. General Motors Institute Consulting Model

Summary

Based on historical foundations from the areas of speech communication and organizational development, the department of Communication and Organizational Behavior at General Motors Institute is participating in a multi-faceted organizational development program in numerous General Motors facilities. The emphasis is on a general systems approach which emphasizes organization development (in addition to management training and development). The approach employs a survey feedback methodology similar to that described by Bowers and Franklin (1972). The motivation to share the results of these experiences comes from the belief that communication scholars need to know more about how to apply their knowledge to real world problems in business and industry. This need has been further documented elsewhere (Tubbs, 1972). At the same time, however, we believe that this new involvement should be of high quality so that the contributions will be worthwhile. Otherwise, as Bowers and Franklin (1972) point out, "organizational development . . . will go the way of the Great Auk and the 'Group Talking Technique.' In short, organizational development will die, having been more remembered as one more fad." (Page 53.)

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